

# Paradise Creek Nature Park

When Public/Private Partnerships Go Wild, Everyone Wins



An aerial view of Paradise Creek Park reveals its close relationship to the surrounding community.

by Beth Hester  
images courtesy of the  
Elizabeth River Project

**T**hey're calling it Portsmouth's "big dig." To date, 350,000 cubic yards of river silt, clay, and industrial dredge spoil have been excavated from an area formerly known as the mud flats to help create a 40-acre urban nature park and wildlife nursery in the heart of Portsmouth's heavily industrialized Elizabeth River corridor. The park initiative was heralded in the recent *Growing America's Outdoor Heritage and Economy* White House conference on community-driven conservation efforts.

Once completed, Paradise Creek Nature Park will be the third largest park in Portsmouth—and the *only* park specifically designed to promote appreciation of the natural world, be a haven for wildlife and a nursery for fish, and give the community access to one of the region's most successful restoration initiatives. The park conserves 40 acres on the southern branch of the river and will include 11 acres of restored wetlands, plus mature forest. The park has been designed to incorporate green development practices and will boast a wind- and sun-powered interpretive center, two miles of hiking trails, a tidal 'garden', a canoe/kayak launch, a large earthworks sculpture, playground, outdoor classrooms, and picnic pavilions—even composting toilets. Creating the park can be a tactical challenge, especially in the more compact, forested areas,

*"Parks support public health, the economy, the environment, education, and community cohesion... parks produce measurable environmental and community savings. Citizens devoted to creating and revitalizing neighborhood parks help create safe communities."*

—The City Park Alliance



Over 70 community volunteers cleaned up debris uncovered after phragmites was removed along a section of park land.



Area students explore the park's 'living laboratory'.

but agile construction and landscaping teams are constantly devising low-impact construction methods.

A pedestrian bridge will link adjacent neighborhoods to the park. Community support for the park has been overwhelming, and they're already calling it "a place of peace" within the bustling, historic seaport town.

The nature park is what Elizabeth River Project (ERP) founder and Executive Director Marjorie Mayfield Jackson has called the crown jewel of an innovative 250-acre environmental program led by the non-profit organization. It's part of a sub-watershed restoration plan, one that is becoming a model for restoring the greater Elizabeth River and the Chesapeake Bay "one creek at a time." Joe Reiger directs watershed restoration for the ERP and explains how the Paradise Creek Nature Park embodies this strategy:

"Almost twenty years ago when we initially began to look at ways to clean up contaminated areas around the watershed, we had rather scattered tactics. We worked on a

number of projects around the river, but what happened was that in a 200-square-mile watershed, doing a project here and a project there, well, you don't completely realize the impact of your work. We knew that we needed more than a shotgun approach, so we started to look at river remediation and restoration on the sub-watershed level, and after several years we developed a plan to concentrate a great deal of our work on sub-watersheds along the river where everyone can see, and feel, the collective benefit of these efforts."

The Paradise Creek area is a perfect example of this approach, as it's a microcosm of the entire watershed; it is partially residential, partially commercial, and heavily industrialized. Four superfund sites along the creek—largely legacies of wartime shipyard activity—have been remediated by the U.S. Navy and transformed into wildlife-friendly, warm-season grass meadows.

Since its inception, the ERP has forged a unique partnership of public/private concerns for the benefit of the region. The Paradise Creek Nature Park project showcases the







The artist renditions here and on pp. 22–23 help park visitors envision all the amenities to be offered upon project completion.



A local Young Life group enthusiastically pitches in to trim invasive vines.

powerful impact of ongoing conservation and restoration partnerships that range from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, the U.S. Navy, the Virginia Port Authority, the University of Virginia School of Architecture, Enviva LP, Giant Cement, SPSA, CSX Transportation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, to various foundations, garden clubs, and civic leagues. Park construction may be in its first phase, but already the beneficial effects are reverberating throughout the community.

The public entrance to the park was once a garbage and phragmites-filled border flanking a busy roadway and concealing an impromptu transient encampment. Now, people driving past this strip of land will enjoy a changing seasonal palette of native plants and vegetation. The adjoining parking area is constructed of pervious gravel paving to reduce stormwater runoff, and the medians will perform double-duty as rain gardens.

Varieties of wildlife species are currently reclaiming this revitalized area as their own, and a recent survey undertaken by an Old Dominion University ornithology team discovered 14 species of birds. Box turtles have

been spotted, and there are fox, osprey, garter snakes, and a great horned owl. A nearby oyster reef at the mouth of the creek was created by community volunteers, and 16 species of healthy fish have been recorded using these new piscatorial amenities. An exciting part of the wetland creation is the formation of an open channel that will link the wetlands directly to Paradise Creek, thus creating a viable nursery for fish, crabs, and local aquatic life.

The nature park also will serve as a teacher training base and living laboratory for students. The Portsmouth Public School System is already creating a “wetlands in the classroom” curriculum that will support SOL mandates. The programs of study will include an osprey initiative, pre-school wildflower program, and oyster reef experience.

Volunteers, including participants from the Boy Scouts and Young Life Association, have logged many hours cutting back invasive vines, growing wildflowers for park plantings, and acting as de facto park ambassadors, cultivating beneficial long-term support for the park’s initiatives among area youth. During an official groundbreaking

ceremony, Young Life/I.C. Norcom High School representative Ulysses Keeling thanked the ERP and other project sponsors for involving them in the project, calling their experience “a beautiful thing.”

Paradise Creek Nature Park will be a living legacy for generations to come. From a macro-perspective, it anchors an ever-growing, thriving network of clean river initiatives within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Closer to home, the park and complementary ERP conservation and reclamation projects further the collective goal of making the Elizabeth River swimmable and fishable once again. 🌿

*Beth Hester is a writer and freelance photographer from Portsmouth. Her passions include reading, shooting, kayaking, fishing, tying saltwater flies, and tending her herb garden.*



### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Paradise Creek and other Elizabeth River Project initiatives, visit:

- [www.ElizabethRiver.org](http://www.ElizabethRiver.org)



Volunteers place seed oysters at the mouth of the creek. Craddock neighborhood residents and Boy Scout Troop 222 will grow oysters in floats for summer planting.